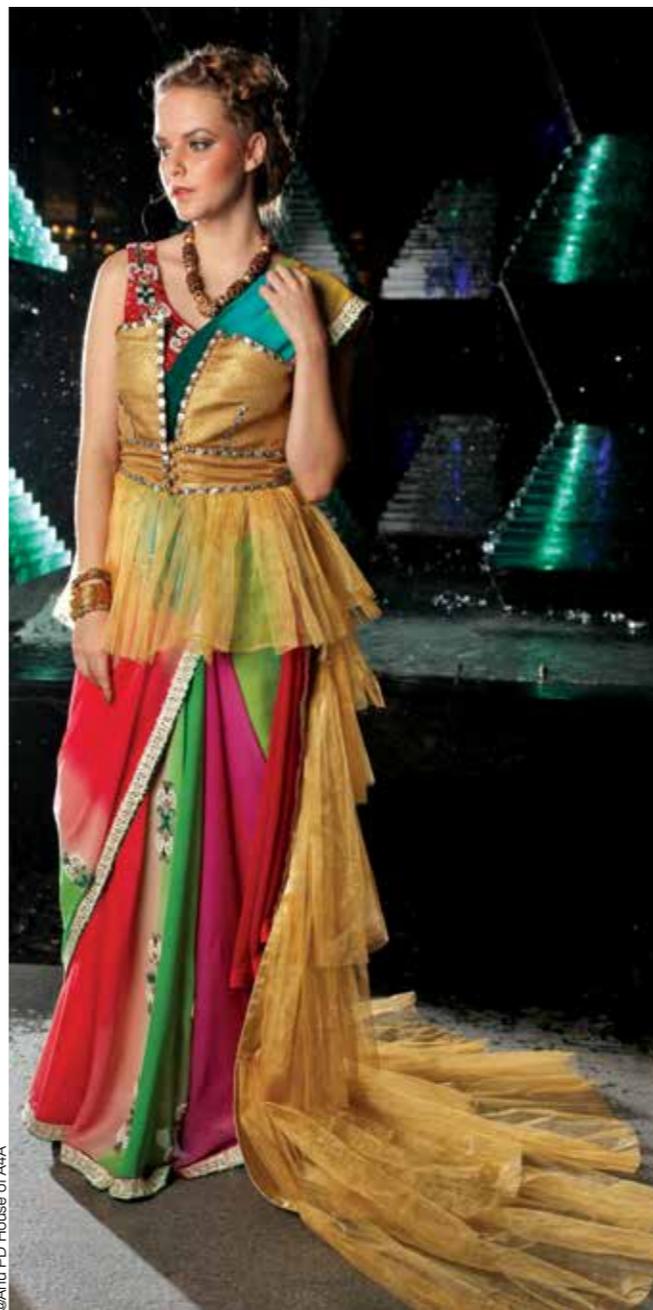




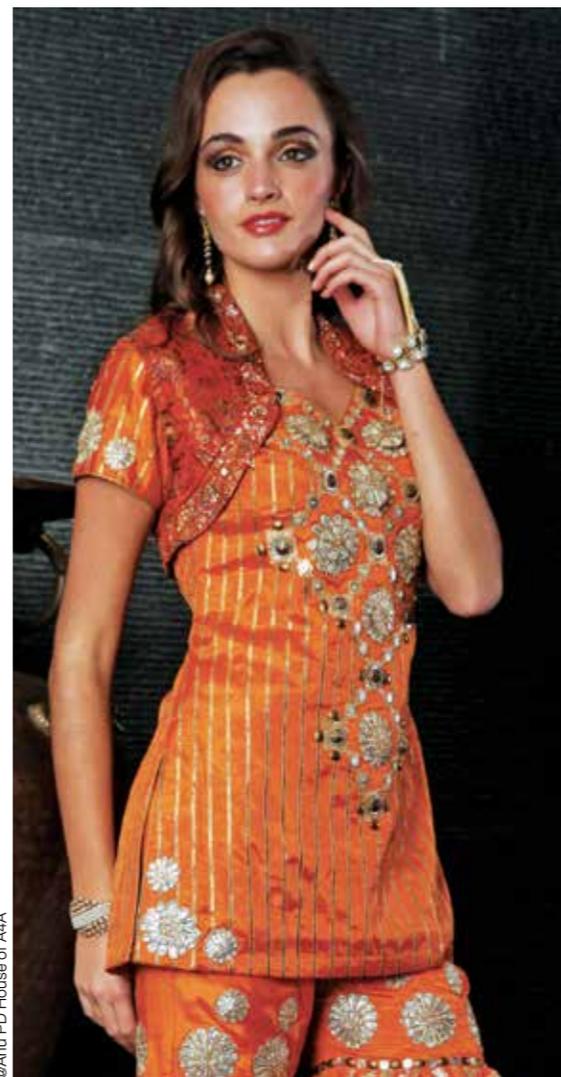
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The Allure of BANARASI WEAVES

Banarasi silk is one of India's most popular fabrics. Bindu Gopal Rao goes behind the scenes to explore the trials and travails of the traditional weavers, here.

Varanasi is said to be the oldest city in the world and is well known for the Banarasi fabric that is woven into beautiful saris as well as contemporary clothing. However, the industry is reeling under an onslaught of power machines and a new generation that is not keen on pursuing the craft.

WEAVES MATTER

'Banarasi' is indeed the 'fabric of antiquity'. Banaras brocades are unique in their complexity and richness. The structure of the weave allows

for complex motifs to be woven in a large number of colours. Banarasi saris come in different weaves as well as different types of silks—which means that you get a lot more variety to choose from. Sagrika Rai, Founder, Warp 'n Weft, says, "The weaves with provenance are as sacred as the city, Varanasi, which imbues it with spirituality and history. Having become a cynosure of cultural and creative activity, Varanasi, (known locally as Banaras) along with its famed brocade and silk weaves have occupied a key position in the landscape of handloom in the Indian

subcontinent." Designer Lira Gupta, Filme Fashion adds, "The weaves are one of a kind. The work and patience put behind making one piece is always shown on the fabric. You get the sense of your roots and your history by wearing them and also poise when you put it on."

The process of Banarasi weaves cannot be easily duplicated or imitated. The two most peculiar techniques of the weaves are 'kadhua' and 'kadhiyal'. "Kadhua is a technique where the weaver has to weave each boota individually as opposed to the 'fekwa' technique where the weaver creates the boota together in the same width with float yarns in the back which have to be cut manually, later. This tactic has more impact as compared to fekwa technique. Kadhiyal is the most complicated weaving technique which no power loom machine has ever been able to replicate. In this technique, a weaver can weave two different natures of the fabric in the same width. For example, we make a kadhiyal sari wherein the entire body of the sari is in kora-organza fabric and the border in the same width is woven in Tussar fabric. The weaver throws a different shuttle for kora yarn and a different shuttle for Tussar yarn in the same weft simultaneously. Where both the yarns meet, the weaver manually intertwines them and throws them back in the weft, in their respective shuttles," explains Utkarsh Rastogi, Founder, Kaasi Sari.

CHALLENGES GALORE

Today, the handloom sector is overshadowed by the presence of the mill and power loom sector. Their aggressive, organised and well-funded lobbies have ensured that the voice and needs of the handloom weaver are not given



their due. "The negative impact has reached serious proportions. Weavers are taking up other occupations, such as pulling rickshaws and making incense sticks. The women, in turn, have taken up domestic labour in the homes of middle-class families. In addition, weavers are leaving Varanasi and migrating to Surat. This is due to the better status of weavers in that city, which has a better demand for their products and provides better wages. In fact, in Surat, many weavers are ironically joining the 'duplicate' Banarasi sari manufacturing process, as it is more economically viable," say David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore of Abraham and Thakore. The introduction of the power loom has reduced the demand for cloth



produced by handloom weavers. The average wage of a weaver fell drastically; weavers who work in factories can earn more than double the money. If you work on a hand loom you get ₹200 a day but it is around ₹500 with an electric loom. With a hand loom, you get one metre (of cloth) in a day and with machine-loom, you get 10 metres—it's all about quantity. Those hand weavers who found masters willing to employ them, had to accept far lower wages than in the past and this led to the downfall of hand weaves and the market for Banarasi weaves.

REVIVAL MEASURES

The government is trying to create better awareness for handlooms and many fashion designers have begun to work with the sector and are beginning to bring attention to these textiles. Today, there are NGOs and different organisations supporting the revival of the handloom sector. The government responded to the weavers by establishing co-operative institutions. The objective was to develop forward (marketing of saris) and backward (providing raw silk) linkages to ameliorate the conditions of weavers. Micro-credit facilities form an important component.

Current research shows that weavers are now doing well and have received government support in financing and marketing of Banarasi saris. Establishment or revival of trade unions, co-operatives, and other workers' organisations is must for sustainable development. "An online portal on weaving could go a long way in spreading awareness and promoting sales. It would enhance direct market access to weavers, nationally and internationally. Other mechanisms of direct market access can be 'artisan haats' in the line of Dilli Haat and exhibitions at local and national levels," opines Sumona Parekh, Fashion Designer. Besides this, upgradation and integration of weavers' expositions into the

traditional melas of Varanasi would be beneficial. A local museum to document the various practices in the sari-weaving sectors is required.”

Anuradha P Dhawan, Creative Director, Anu PD House of A4A, states, “Efforts are being made by NGOs and benefactors, like the Banarasi Weaver Association, Bunkar (Weaver) Dastakar Adhikaar Manch, Varanasi. This provides weavers a platform to sell their saris online to the global diaspora cutting off intermediaries who are exploiting the grassroots weaver for centuries.



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Weavers in India have existed from the time of Buddha down the ages when the Mughal motifs revitalised the designs of brocades and now many modern designers are referencing contemporary patterns and fashion designers are fashioning this rich fabric in many versatile ways.”

GOVERNMENT IMPETUS

The prime minister has initiated the ‘Make in India’ campaign that has envisioned and enlightened every Indian around the globe to think twice before buying a non-Indian made product. “A veteran BJP leader, Shaina NC had initiated a movement where she collected over 70 popular fashion designers of our country and taken them to Varanasi for a meeting with local manufacturers to discuss the scope of Banarasi weaves in the fashion sector and to find ways to revive the century old craft. Success for the handloom industry was when a hand-picked collection of Banarasi saris and fabrics were showcased at the Lakme India Fashion Week by the Ministry of Textile in Mumbai. Another major step taken by government was by celebrating National Handloom Day in Banaras under the guidelines of textile minister, Smt Smriti Zubin Irani, where in there was an active participation by a dozen budding textile designers from the National Institute of Fashion Technology, New Delhi. Also, a small subsidiary of NIFT has opened in Varanasi, at the ‘Weavers Service Centre’ where they invite young boys and girls to learn the process of hand-weaving at a very nominal fee structure,” says Rastogi. ■



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